

Indonesian Colonialism in the Pacific

Liem Soei Liong

We know how difficult it is for us to defeat Indonesia militarily but nor can Indonesia defeat us militarily. And because of our diplomatic struggle, Indonesia will remain a focus of the world community — in Europe, the US and the Pacific . . . To solidarity organisations, we express deepest gratitude; please intensify your struggle . . . to NGOs: please try harder [to convince] the world that human rights violations *do* take place in East Timor. This is not just a matter of murder, torture and maltreatment; they should also explain why these violations occur! — because our people want freedom.'

✱ An activist in the East Timor clandestine movement.

THE BOUNDARIES OF YOUNG NATIONS are in most cases defined by the old colonial boundaries — and they are often the origin of conflict in a region. The Gulf War was a typical example, where the meddling of twentieth-century superpowers, the British Empire and the Pax Americana created a permanent sphere of destabilisation in the entire Middle East.

The eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago, part of the Pacific Rim, is one of these regions where a continuous atmosphere of conflict and destabilisation is present. The decolonisation of the former Dutch colony was implemented in such a way that it will remain a region of conflict unless the people in the region are given the right to determine their own future. Similar problems occur in the other two major Asian countries, India and China, where aspirations of peoples in certain regions are ignored and neglected or suppressed. While in China and India huge empires existed with vast areas of influence, the region called Indonesia could never claim such an unity. Javanese or Sumatran kingdoms like Majapahit or Sriwijaya never achieved any real hold over the eastern part of the archipelago and were more westward-looking.

This westward outlook can be explained by 'western' influences: Hinduism and later Islam from Indian, Chinese and Arab traders and European colonialism. Mecca and Amsterdam, the centres of wisdom, progress and science, were situated in the west. In the eyes of many learned people in Java and Sumatra, west meant progress and the east backwardness. This attitude remains the dominant attitude even in the present day. The rulers in Jakarta look upon the three eastern 'provinces' as backward regions that should be civilised, economically developed and Indonesianised. All the major features of colonialism can be seen in the three regions, and it is easy to understand why the people in those regions have been resisting colonial rule ever since.

Although similarly colonised by Jakarta, the three regions do have a different historical background. Each was incorporated into the Indonesia in a different way, in a different period. The Moluccas were allocated to Indonesia through an unjust decolonisation process in 1950. West Papua, annexed in 1963, is a typical example of betrayal and neglect by the international community. East Timor, a former Portuguese colony and never part of the Dutch East Indies, was simply invaded in 1975 by the Indonesian armed forces.

The Military Invasion of East Timor

Before the invasion the Indonesian Republic had never laid any claim to East Timor. Nor did it challenge Portuguese colonial rule in the territory at the United Nations or elsewhere. The mainstream Indonesian nationalists accepted the former borders of the Dutch East Indies as the boundaries of the Republic of Indonesia. Indeed, during the 1950s and 1960s, when Indonesia was pressing hard its claims to West Papua, it made a point of denying any interest in these Portuguese-held territory and insisted that its claim to West Papua was based on the territory's former position within the boundaries of the Dutch East Indies.

East Timor is roughly the size of El Salvador, inhabited by around 650,000 people, predominantly of Melanesian stock and for almost 500 years a colony of the Portuguese. The struggle for self-determination in East Timor was greatly boosted by the overthrow of the fascist Salazar regime in Portugal in April 1974. With the lifting of political repression in the colony, several political parties emerged, the right-wing Union for Democratic Timor (UDT) and the progressive Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) as the most important. Relations between the two parties had their ups and downs, but these were soured when several UDT leaders decided to side with the Indonesian authorities.

In October 1974, President Suharto of Indonesia, together with some of his top generals, secretly planned a special operation to destabilise East Timor. This operation was later transformed into a full-scale military invasion. In August 1975, a civil war broke out when UDT launched a coup in Dili, the capital of East Timor. Fretilin, which enjoyed wide support throughout the country, struck back and, after two weeks of bitter fighting, defeated the UDT forces, gaining almost complete control over East Timor. As soon as the skirmishes started, the Portuguese authorities fled to the island of Atauro, Indonesia then realised its destabilisation schemes had backfired and decided to go ahead with preparations for an invasion.

On 28 November 1975, the Democratic Republic of East Timor was proclaimed. Nine days later, on 7 December 1975, 10,000 Indonesian troops supported by fighter planes, naval and amphibious vessels, helicopters and tanks invaded East Timor. The people of East Timor fought back and are still resisting Indonesian rule.

Many armed resistance fighters — including almost the entire leadership — were killed or captured by 1979. However, Falintil, the armed resistance movement, regrouped under its present commander, Shanana Gusmao. Since 1980, small groups of Falintil guerrillas have successfully forged links with people living under Indonesian control in strategic settlements. Indonesian army operations in 1981, 1983-84, 1986-87, 1988 and 1990-91 failed to defeat the guerrillas.

The Indonesian army keeps a territorial force of about 12,000 troops in East Timor; when special operations are under way, reinforcements can bring the number to 30,000 or more. The Indonesian army runs East Timor with a special command structure; at all levels the civilian administration is penetrated by army personnel. Indonesian rule has been brutal, repressive and racially discriminatory, destroying Timorese culture and customs and turning the economy into military-run monopolies. The strong military presence, visible in the streets and part of everyday life, is a constant sign of Indonesian occupation.

Until early 1989, East Timor was inaccessible to the outside world. However, strong outside pressure eventually compelled President Suharto to allow restricted access to the territory. Limited numbers of journalists and tourists were permitted to visit the territory in order to convince world opinion that East Timor was no longer a security problem and that the population has accepted integration. Another objective was to attract foreign investment. Both objectives failed, as the Timorese used the slight opening of the region to demonstrate their deep-rooted opposition to Indonesian Rule. The visit of Pope John Paul II in October ended in a pro-youth to show their defiance. The unstable situation has also kept foreign investment away from East Timor.

The UN and East Timor

A few days after the Indonesian invasion, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution strongly deploring the military intervention and stressing the inalienable right for self-determination of the East Timorese. Unlike the swift implementation of the resolutions on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the East Timor issue was drawn out in a once-a-year resolution up to 1982. The crucial factor was the role of the United States, abstaining in 1975 but in the following years voting against the East Timor resolution. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was US ambassador at the UN during the crucial early years, said later in his memoirs:

The US wished things to turn out as they did in East Timor and worked to bring this about. The Department of State desired that the UN prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. The task was given to me and I carried it out with no inconsiderable success.²

The Indonesian invasion actually took place the day after the President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger completed a state visit to Jakarta. It was clear that the US condoned Indonesia's act of aggression when Ford told the press in Jakarta that 'the US understands Indonesia's position on the [Timor] question'.³ The US embassy in Jakarta was instructed to cut down its reporting on East Timor. In January 1976, a US State Department official was quoted as saying:

The US wants to keep its relationship with Indonesia close and friendly. We regard Indonesia as a friendly non-aligned state — a nation we do a lot of business with. In terms of bilateral relations between the US and Indonesia, we are more or less condoning the incursion into East Timor.⁴

With a few exceptions, the Western powers, Australia and New Zealand have abstained on the UN voting. Australia became the first Western power to give *de facto*, then *de jure* recognition to Indonesia's annexation since 1978.

In November 1982, the East Timor issue appeared for the last time on the agenda of the UN General Assembly. Resolution 37/30 was narrowly adopted by fifty votes to forty-six, instructing the Secretary-General to 'initiate consultations with all parties directly concerned with a view to exploring avenues for achieving a comprehensive settlement of the problem and report thereon to the General Assembly at its 39th session'. However, only Portugal and Indonesia have been consulted. UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar has ignored demands for representatives of the East Timorese people to be consulted. Since 1982, he has annually informed the General Assembly that consultations between Portugal and Indonesia 'are continuing'. In fact, they are deadlocked: Indonesia refuses to allow the issue of self-determination to be raised, and Portugal is afraid to jeopardise the talks and be accused of causing a breakdown in the negotiations. Other countries have taken no initiative to rescue the issue from the quagmire of inaction. As a result, no further resolutions have been tabled — the General Assembly has been silenced.

Since 1985, consultations between Portugal and Indonesia have concentrated on negotiating the terms for a visit to East Timor by a group of Portuguese MPs. Although diplomatic disagreements have kept the two sides apart, the main stumbling block is that the forces of occupation know that such a visit would provoke anti-Indonesian demonstrations and rallies calling on Portugal to press the UN for an internationally supervised referendum.

Australia and Timor oil

East Timor is famous for its high-quality coffee and other agricultural products, such as sandalwood and eucalyptus. But the huge reserves of oil discovered off the south coast of East Timor are the region's prime assets. Negotiations between Australia and Portugal to exploit these reserves in 1972 came to nothing after discord between the two nations over the sea boundaries. The Australians recognised they could more easily strike a deal with the Indonesians than the Portuguese.

In October 1976, ten months after the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, Australia and Indonesia began negotiations to establish the seabed boundary. Two years later Australia gave *de jure* recognition to Indonesia's annexation of East Timor as the precursor to establishing a seabed accord and exploiting the offshore oil. The oil reserves located in the Timor Gap, according to a 1977 study by the Elf-Aquitaine company, are huge, with estimates of between one and seven billion barrels of oil. In December 1989, Australia and Indonesia signed the Timor Gap Treaty, assuring Australia a hugely profitable expansion of petroleum companies. Australia's Foreign Minister, Senator Gareth Evans, justified the signing of this illegal treaty by telling the Senate:

We have taken the view since 1979 that whatever the unhappy circumstances, and indeed, possibly illegality, surrounding Indonesia's acquisition of East Timor in the 1970s, Indonesian sovereignty over the territory should be accepted not only on a *de facto* basis, but on a *de jure* basis. There is no legal obligation not to recognise acquisition of territory that was acquired by force.⁵

Australia's unprincipled and corrupt decision, taken even before Indonesia invaded and annexed East Timor, has been crucial in influencing the attitude of the West; it contributed substantially to the lack of political will at the UN to defend East Timor against a brutal predator. Whereas in the case of Kuwait, it was in Western interests to prevent Iraq from dominating large quantities of oil resources, in the case of East Timor's oil, Western interests worked the opposite way, favouring the invader against the victim.

A comprehensive solution for East Timor

From the early beginning, before the invasion, the independence movement of East Timor favoured talks with the Indonesians. The invasion, the heavy bombings, war-related famine and disease made it impossible for the East Timorese resistance to launch proposals for a peaceful settlement. Only in March 1983 did Shanana Gusmao, leader of the Timorese resistance, meet the Indonesian commander, Colonel Purwanto, for preliminary talks. On this occasion Shanana laid out his peace plan, and over and over again he has shown his willingness to negotiate with the Indonesians. In an interview with Australian lawyer Robert Domm in the mountains during September 1990, Shanana stated once again:

I would agree to the territory being placed under a UN administration as the first step towards seeking a final solution. I have already stated and will repeat that I am interested in discussing any plan for a solution under the supervision of the UN and under the conditions of a ceasefire.⁶

West Papua and the Failure of the International Community

The island of Papua is the second largest in the world, next to Greenland. The eastern half is the independent state of Papua New Guinea. The western half is ruled by the Indonesians. The people of West Papua are Melanesians, of the same ethnic origin as the people of PNG. The western part was previously called Dutch West New Guinea and was part of the Dutch East Indies, which was later transformed into Indonesia.

During Dutch rule, West New Guinea remained a marginal area. Although the Dutch realised the importance of the natural resources and minerals of the region, capital investment before the Second World War was still focused on the western part of the archipelago. The Indonesian nationalism that emerged early this century, directed against Dutch rule, was nonexistent in West Papua. The people in West Papua were organised in small tribal entities; in fact, small sovereign tribal states that were economic, political and military entities. Dutch colonial rule was remote and only effective in the bigger centres or towns. During the Pacific War the Japanese easily drove the small and isolated Dutch military posts into oblivion. West Papua became a battleground between the Allied forces and the Japanese and, like the East Timorese, the Papuans sided with the Allies.

The post-war period was the beginning of a new era. The Dutch tried in vain to restore their rule over the archipelago, but the global scene had changed entirely. Although the Dutch gained the upper hand militarily in 1948, they were forced to negotiate the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia, mainly because the US sided with the emerging ex-colonies. US threats to withdraw Marshall Aid to the Netherlands forced the Dutch to join the 1949 conference of decolonisation. In December 1949, the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia took place, but West New Guinea remained a disputed issue.

Indonesian nationalists were not united over West Papua. In the discussions preparing for Indonesian independence in 1945, two opposing views emerged: the first view, led by Sukarno, who later became president, firmly argued that the entire Dutch East Indies should be the territory of the new republic, moreover it should also include the whole of Timor (Portuguese), North Borneo (British) and the whole of the Malay Peninsula. Muhammad Hatta, Indonesia's first vice-president, strongly disagreed, calling the views 'imperialistic and expansionist'. Hatta refuted the claim that Papuans are Indonesians and insisted they were Melanesians. He warned later:

If we proceed with the demand for Papua, it is possible that we shall not be satisfied with Papua only and that we may want to include the Solomons and so on as far as the middle of the Pacific Ocean... I am inclined to say that... it should be left to the Papuan people themselves. I recognise that the Papuans have the right to be an independent nation.⁷

In the 1950s, Muhammad Hatta's views turned out in the minority as Sukarno increasingly used the West Papua issue to whip up the nationalist fervour of the Indonesian people. Indonesia had a strong case, as West Papua had been part of the former Dutch East Indies. The Dutch argued that they were preparing the Papuans for self-determination, an argument that hardly convinced many of the young independent nations at the UN. However, Indonesia could not achieve the necessary two-thirds majority needed at the UN. The right of the Papuans to determine their own future was never conceded by the Indonesians. By early 1960, relations between the Dutch and Indonesia had reached their lowest point and Sukarno started mobilising all political parties and mass organisations in Indonesia for a campaign to 'liberate West Irian' (The Indonesian name for the territory). Indonesia's armed forces began dropping para-commandos in to several parts of West Papua.

The Role of the United States

Relations between the US administration and Sukarno had sunk in the latter part of the 1950s, owing to CIA involvement in the armed rebellions in parts of Sumatra and Sulawesi. The rebels received a substantial amount of small arms from American intelligence. But the CIA ploy became an international scandal when the Indonesian military shot down a US fighter-aircraft that was helping the Sulawesi rebels. The American pilot, Allan Pope, was detained by the Indonesian government as proof of US involvement in the affair. The political tide turned when John F. Kennedy became president in 1961. President Kennedy and his brother, Robert, were instrumental in steering the Dutch-Indonesian confrontation over West Papua away from armed conflict. Robert Kennedy, the Attorney-General, visited both countries, urging that negotiations should be held. Gradually Washington shifted in favour of Indonesia's position, regardless of the fact that the Netherlands was a staunch NATO ally.

After months of steady pressure, Washington's special envoy, Elsworth Bunker, brought the two sides together in negotiations, which started in March 1962. With the Netherlands under much pressure, the talks were concluded five months later with an accord that became known as the New York Agreement. Formally speaking, Bunker was mediating on behalf of UN Secretary-General V Thant, but in a real sense Bunker conducted the entire talks. The New York Agreement, based on the Bunker Plan, was a culmination of Washington's efforts to bring about a solution in Indonesia's favour. The fatal flaw in the agreement was that it contained no guarantees that the Papuan people's right to self-determination would be safeguarded in any meaningful way. Again, during the December 1949 decolonisation conference, the US played a decisive role in favour of Indonesia.

The 'Act of No Choice'

The 1962 New York Agreement passed through the UN General Assembly without difficulty and was put into motion within six months. From the time of the Dutch withdrawal and the departure of most Dutch officials on 1 October 1962 until the installation of the Indonesian administration on 1 May 1963, a UN body called United Nations Temporary Executive Authority (UNTEA) was in charge. The UN Peacekeeping Force consisted of Pakistani troops supplemented by an Indonesian army contingent and Papuan police units. Almost immediately, clashes broke out between the Indonesians and the Papuans, and the first Papuan policeman was killed exactly one month after the last Dutch troop ship set sail for Europe.

From the start the Indonesians wanted to make clear who was running the territory and dealt ruthlessly with the Papuans. Members of the Papuan peacekeeping force were disarmed and confined to their barracks. When the Indonesians formally took over on 1 May 1963, the Indonesian troops already had a firm grip over West Papua. The New York Agreement provided for a referendum to be held among the Papuans, but the Indonesian government had no intention of implementing this measure. It was under General Suharto, who seized power in 1965, that the so-called Act of Free Choice took place. Under a system devised by the Indonesian authorities, the Act was exercised by eight regional councils made up of 1,025 local 'representatives', each of them hand-picked by the Indonesian military. The UN, which had 'to advise, to assist and participate', sent an observer — the Bolivian diplomat Ortiz Sanz. He reported many cases of Indonesian wrongdoing and heavy-handed methods being used, but in vain. On 2 August 1969, the council members met in Jayapura and duly decided, without a dissenting vote, to 'remain within Indonesia'. The notorious intelligence officer General Ali Murtopo, President Suharto's most trusted aide, was given the task of stage-managing the entire Act. His ruthless methods paid off.

On 19 November 1969, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution 'taking note' of the UN Secretary-General's Report containing an account by Ortiz Sanz on the conduct of the Act. Fifteen African countries voted against the decision, including the representative of Ghana, who described the Act as 'a travesty of democracy and justice'. However, the General Assembly endorsed the result — it was claimed all the regional councils had, 'without dissent . . . pronounced themselves in favour of the territory remaining within Indonesia'. This must rank as one of the most damning betrayals of principle by the international community through the UN.

Papuan resistance

Papuan opposition to Indonesian rule is widespread and takes many different forms and shapes. The brutal and racist attitude of the Indonesian military and officials has only reinforced anti-Indonesian feeling over the years, and the call for *Papua merdeka*, a free Papua, has reverberated with increasing strength. The standard-bearer of the armed resistance is the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM), or Free Papua Movement. But identification with the OPM does not necessarily mean being involved in the armed struggle. Armed resistance against the Indonesians started as early as 1965, and intensified during the period of the 'Act of Free Choice' in 1969. In the early 1970s, the OPM developed a relatively centralised command under Seth Rumkorem, almost an impossible task considering the huge area of the territory. After a leadership clash in 1977 between Rumkorem and Jacob Prai, the movement split into two and gradually in the 1980s dissolved into many local groups. Rumkorem, as a former professional Indonesian army officer, brought military expertise to the OPM, while Jacob Prai was responsible for the contacts with the underground network in the cities.

It was Runkorem who, on 1 July 1971, proclaimed the independence of West Papua and was designated President of the Government of West Papua. The proclamation of independence became the catalyst for intensified guerrilla activity, armed skirmishes, local uprisings and consolidation of the OPM. In 1977 and 1978, major uprisings emerged in different parts of West Papua and numerous attacks were launched by OPM units on Indonesian military and police posts. In the early 1980s, the battle between OPM guerrillas and the Indonesian troops became fiercer and more bloody. Every OPM operation was met by Indonesian mopping-up drives combined with aerial bombardments. The border area with PNG, where OPM guerrilla units had semi-permanent bases, became a frequent battleground.

In February 1984, an ill-prepared attack on the capital, Jayapura, took place. Although the revolt prepared for many months in advance by the different OPM factions, serious complications emerged before it was launched. Lack of co-ordination, hasty and ill-judged action and information leaked to Indonesian intelligence made the entire operation a clumsy one. The Indonesian army struck back savagely, with house-to-house searches, arrests and torture. The population fled *en masse* to the PNG border area. The abortive Jayapura revolt was a major setback for the OPM. In particular the strong underground network in Jayapura and vicinity was severely struck. OPM continued its activities, but they were much smaller and more local — to the extent that many guerrilla units could now be better described as tribally based. However, OPM continues operating and has little difficulty recruiting new members.

The abundance of natural resources

West Papua is one of the richest natural resource territories on the globe, with large deposits of oil, minerals and other commodities. The rough terrain, the formidable natural barriers and the rudimentary infrastructure made it virtually impossible for the Dutch in colonial times, and later, Indonesian companies, to exploit West Papuan riches. The resources in West Papua fall into five main categories: oil, minerals, timber, cash crops and fisheries.

Only after Suharto came to power in 1965 did foreign investors enter the territory to conduct surveys and begin exploiting these resources. Dutch geologists in the 1930s had already found traces of many valuable minerals such as nickel, cobalt, gold, silver, copper, chromium, marble, and limestone. The many oil discoveries had made West Papua a territory of conflict between the two Pacific powers, US and Japan, and Dutch colonial rule. In particular, it was in the long-term interest of Standard Oil, run by the Rockefellers, to terminate Dutch colonial rule in the Asia-Pacific region. It was Japan that drove the Dutch away from West Papua during the Second World War. Ironically, now a large share of West Papuan natural resources has finally fallen into the hands of US and Japanese firms. The US company Freeport runs one of the biggest copper mines in the world, has the biggest gold mine in the region, and is listed as the biggest corporate taxpayer in Indonesia. Several US oil companies are producing oil, while the Japanese have made large investments in the timber and pulp industry.

The Indonesian government has also seen the economic prospects of West Papua. It has developed ambitious plans to develop the economy through agribusiness like cash-crop plantations, timber concessions and the development of a wood-processing industry. In the late 1970s, the government in Jakarta started to develop massive plans to transmute people from the densely populated island of Java to other islands. West Papua became one of the major targets. Indonesia argued that this resettlement policy could ease the population density in Java and at the same time could promote the development of West Papua through the promotion of a cash crop economy and intensive farming.

The transmigration programme turned out to be one of the most expensive and disastrous development programmes ever developed in the Third World. It not only failed to achieve its major objectives, but also created many more problems on the receiving end. Traditional land was seized by the Papuans, the poor transmigrants remained poor and became a social problem and, above all, the danger emerged that Papuans would become a minority in their own country. In the last years of the 1980s, transmigration was heavily scaled down, not least because of the many failures and the drop in enthusiasm among potential transmigrants.

The East Timor issue has remained a marginal international issue, but the West Papua issue is even more hidden away in history and the minds of the international community. While East Timor is every year still firmly on the agenda of the UN Decolonisation Committee, the international agenda for the West Papuans is confined to human rights and indigenous rights issues. Worldwide ignorance of the tragic events that led to the colonisation of West Papua by Indonesia, the nature of continuing repression and the extent of resistance to Indonesian rule have made it possible for Indonesia to proceed with the destruction of Papuan life, largely unhampered by international condemnation.

West Papua, as an issue, has been ignored and the international community appears to support Jakarta. West Papua and the plight of the West Papuans should be put back on the international agenda. The issue should be put before the Decolonisation Committee, and West Papuan representatives should be allowed to attend the South Pacific Forum as observers and be admitted as a member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

The Moluccas — a Forgotten Drama

The Moluccas consist of almost 1,000 islands, stretching north-south from the Philippines to Australia and east-west between Sulawesi and West Papua. The Moluccas, or *Maluku*, are an archetype of a colonial territory. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Maluku became the most coveted place for the European colonial explorer. Known as the 'Spice Islands', they had been earlier 'discovered' by Indian and Chinese traders, and became an obsession for the Portuguese and Spanish, who tried to find a route there. The spices most sought after were the clove and nutmeg, at that time solely to be found on the Maluku Islands.

After the 'Portuguese century' (the sixteenth), Dutch colonialism established a firm control over the Moluccas. A brutal kind of colonialism was imposed on the islands, with the main purpose of controlling the production and trade of the spices. In the twentieth century the spice trade lost its economic importance and the Moluccas — in particular the island of Ambon — became a recruiting ground for the Dutch to fill posts in the colonial administration and the Dutch colonial army (KNIL).

Unitarianism against federalism

With the conclusion of the 1949 decolonisation conference, the primary objective of the Indonesian independence struggle was achieved — the transfer of sovereignty to an independent Indonesian state. The Republic of the United States of Indonesia (RUSI) comprised sixteen constituent states. The Republic of Indonesia was by far the largest member of the federation; the other fifteen were puppet, or semi-puppet, states set up by the Dutch in a futile attempt to maintain control over the region by appointing local élites, hostile to Jakarta, as heads of states. Within months the majority of puppet states crumbled as Indonesian nationalism emerged strongly among the population. Federalism became synonymous with Dutch collaboration, while Indonesian nationalists automatically embraced unitarianism.

In East Indonesia the situation was more complex. The state of East Indonesia, comprising Sulawesi, the Moluccas and West Timor, was not politically coherent at all. The seat of government was in Macassar, in South Sulawesi, with strong pro-republican feelings among the population. At the same time most of the troops stationed there were former KNIL units. Jakarta was determined to demolish the federal structure, which it considered to be a dangerous base for neo-colonial manoeuvrings. It decided to send troops from Java to balance the situation, creating severe tensions in the government of East Indonesia. An uprising against Indonesian rule broke out, led by Andi Aziz. The state of East Indonesia fell apart, but a cabinet minister, Dr Christiaan Soumokil, fled to his home island of Ambon.

On 21 April 1950, the state of East Indonesia was incorporated into the Republic of Indonesia. The situation became more tense and a mass rally of 6,000 people in Ambon City declared support for total independence. Local political and military leaders in the South Moluccas Council, constituted during the period of the Dutch occupation, came together on 25 April and proclaimed the South Moluccas independent. Soumokil was appointed president of the Republic of South Moluccas (RMS). The council said it had taken this action because East Indonesia had been unable to maintain its position as part of the RUSI. The South Moluccas was one of the thirteen regions within the East Indonesian constitution. It includes the islands of Ambon, Buru, Seram, Saparua, Haruku and Nusa Laut. Support for the RMS in these islands was widespread, but the vast majority of those outside the South Moluccas had no interest in the new state.

The proclamation of the RMS was seen by Jakarta as a rebellion and a major strike force was sent to Ambon to crush the revolt. The majority of the Moluccan military, about 6,000 troops, were still stationed in Java and Sumatra and were not allowed to be mobilised on Ambon. The RMS Under President Soumokil, continued its struggle against the Indonesians in the jungle of Seram. In December 1963, Chris Soumokil was captured and three years later President Suharto ordered his execution. After 1963, the armed resistance faded away, but the RMS ideals live on in the hearts of many Moluccans. Indonesian rule over the Moluccas has been heavy-handed and any public sign of sympathy is punished heavily.

Growing Opposition

The 6,000 former KMIL soldiers became victims of circumstance. Not allowed to be demobilised in the Moluccas, they refused to become part of the Indonesian army. Finally the Dutch decided to ship them, together with their families, to the Netherlands. Forty years later the Moluccan community in the Netherlands has grown to 40,000 people, the majority of whom still cherish the idea of an independent state.

The execution of Soumokil was seen as a signal by the Moluccan exiles that the centre of the struggle should be switched to the Netherlands. A series of radical actions were undertaken by the second generation of Moluccans: the attack on the Indonesian embassy in 1970, the hijack of a commuter train, the hijacking of Indonesian diplomats in the Indonesian consulate in Amsterdam; and the occupation of an elementary school filled with pupils and teachers. In the 1980s, Moluccan radicalism declined in the Netherlands, but at the same time RMS activities emerged again in the Moluccas itself — in particular on the islands of Saparua and Ambon. On 25 April each year, the RMS flag is raised while anti-Indonesian feelings flare. The flag-raisers were arrested and a thorough house search was carried out in the entire village. The following year more flags were raised in different places. In contrast with East Timor and West Papua — which are formally controlled by a native governor — the Maluku provincial governor is Major-General Sebastian Sukoso, a tough former commando. The previous military skills of the Moluccans are still lingering in the minds of many of the old-generation Indonesian officers.

Like the population in other troublesome areas such as West Papua and Aceh, Moluccans are being discriminated against in their own country. Outsiders invest in logging, plywood factories and fisheries, but the factories are not geared for the benefit of the local population. Instead, non-Moluccans increasingly have taken over the economy and Moluccans are increasingly marginalised. Educated Moluccans have left their islands in growing numbers and found employment in Java.

While in many parts of the Pacific Rim the manufacturing industry has marched ahead, the Moluccas have been left desolate with a weak and inadequate infrastructure, lack of transportation between the islands and lack of political will from Jakarta. Forty years after their declaration of independence, the Moluccans are still seeking the fundamental right to determine their own future. The present incorporation into the Republic of Indonesia has failed completely and new openings must be found in the international arena. The Moluccan issue should appear at UN level and in international conferences held in the Pacific.